March 1938

THE ILLUSION OF "ORDINARY LIFE"

What may be called the profane point of view is, as we have often said, nothing other than the product of a veritable spiritual degeneration, since it could not exist in an integrally traditional civilization, where all things, whatever domain they may belong to, necessarily participate in the sacred character that is that of tradition itself, the traditional civilization being at the same time that which one may rightly regard as normal. There is therefore something, in sum, abnormal in the point of view that consists, even where certain traditional elements still subsist, in setting them aside in a manner altogether separate, in assigning them a place as restricted as possible, in such a way that they no longer exercise any influence over the rest of human activity, which will henceforth be regarded as constituting a profane domain, although, in reality, such a domain can have no legitimate existence; and this supposed profane domain moreover becoming more and more invasive, this is, in the final analysis, nothing other than a movement toward the complete negation of all tradition, such as one can observe in the modern Western world.

From this profane point of view was born the idea of what is commonly designated as "ordinary life" or "everyday life"; what is meant by this, in fact, is well, before anything else, that in which, by the exclusion of the sacred, ritual, or symbolic (whether this be envisaged in the specifically religious sense or according to any other traditional modality), all that is supra-human is relegated to an "extraordinary" domain, considered as exceptional, strange, and even disquieting; there is therefore there, properly speaking, a reversal of the normal order, which can only lead to ignorance or to the negation of the supra-human. Some even go so far as to employ, in the same sense, the expression

“real life,” which, at bottom, is of a singular irony, for the truth is that what they so name is on the contrary the worst of illusions; we do not mean by that that the things in question are in themselves devoid of all reality, although this reality, which is in sum that of the sensible order itself, is at the lowest degree of all; but it is the way in which they are envisaged that is entirely false, which, by separating them from every superior principle, precisely denies them that which constitutes all their reality.

One sees from this how, in this conception of “ordinary life,” one passes almost imperceptibly from one stage to another, degeneration becoming progressively accentuated: one begins by admitting that certain things may be withdrawn from all traditional influence, then it is these things that come to be considered as normal; from there, one easily arrives at regarding them as the only “real” ones, which amounts to rejecting as “unreal” everything supra-human; and even, the human domain itself being conceived in an increasingly narrowly limited manner, one ends by reducing it to the sole corporeal modality, excluding everything that is simply of a “suprasensible” order. One need only observe how our contemporaries constantly employ, without even thinking about it, the word “real” as a synonym of “sensible,” to realize that it is indeed to this last point that they have effectively arrived.

One could also show without difficulty that modern philosophy, which is in sum only a “systematized” expression of the general mentality, has followed a parallel course: it began with the Cartesian praise of “common sense,” which is very characteristic in this respect, for “ordinary life” is assuredly, par excellence, the domain of this so-called “common sense,” as limited as it and in the same manner; then, from rationalism, which is in sum only a philosophical aspect of “humanism,” one arrives little by little at materialism or positivism: whether one expressly denies, as does the former, everything that is beyond the sensible world, or whether one contents oneself, as does the latter, with refusing to concern oneself with it by declaring it “inaccessible” or “unknowable,” the result, in fact, is exactly the same in both cases, and it is indeed that which we have just described.

It should only be added that, in most people, it is only a matter of what one may call a "practical" materialism or positivism, independent of any philosophical theory, and which may very well exist even among people who, in good faith, believe themselves to be far removed from materialism and positivism, but who, in all circumstances, nonetheless behave as their adherents; and this example clearly shows that philosophy, at bottom, has very little importance, or that at least it has importance only insofar as it may be considered as "representative" of a certain mentality, rather than as acting effectively upon it; could a philosophical conception have the least success if it did not respond to some of the predominant tendencies of the epoch in which it is formulated? We do not, moreover, wish to say that philosophers do not play, like others, their role in the modern deviation, which would be exaggerated, but only that this role is more restricted than one might be tempted to suppose, and quite different from what it may seem externally.

In a wholly general manner, what is most apparent is always, according to the very laws that govern manifestation, a consequence rather than a cause, an outcome rather than a point of departure, and, in any case, it is never there that one must seek what acts in a truly effective manner in a deeper order, whether this be an action exercised in a normal and legitimate sense, or on the contrary, as in the case of which we are presently speaking.

We do not claim to envisage here all the aspects of the question: thus, one might ask how the illusion in question is linked to another specifically modern illusion, that which pretends to reduce everything to purely quantitative elements, which properly constitutes "mechanism." On this point, we shall only remark that this "mechanistic" conception, although it naturally also has its philosophical expression, which goes back to Cartesianism, is linked more directly to the "scientific" side of the materialist tendency (we say only tendency, because, theoretically, mechanism and materialism do not coincide exactly in all cases), and that this latter certainly has, for various reasons, much more influence

than philosophical theories on the common mentality, in which there is always at least an implicit belief in the truth of a "science" whose hypothetical character inevitably escapes it, whereas everything that presents itself as philosophy leaves it more or less indifferent; the existence of practical and utilitarian applications in one case, and their absence in the other, is perhaps not entirely foreign to this.

This brings us back precisely once again to the idea of "ordinary life," into which there effectively enters a fairly strong dose of "pragmatism": as soon as it is agreed that "reality" consists exclusively in what falls under the senses, it is entirely natural that the value of any given thing should be measured by its capacity to produce effects of a sensible order; now it is evident that "science," considered in the modern way as essentially bound up with industry, if not even more or less completely confused with it, must from this point of view occupy the first rank, and that thereby it finds itself as closely involved as possible in this "ordinary life," of which it even becomes, in a certain sense, one of the principal factors; by a rebound effect, the hypotheses on which it claims to be founded will themselves benefit from this privileged situation in the eyes of the vulgar.

That being said, one may understand that, when we speak of the materialist attitude as being that of the great majority of our contemporaries, we understand it in the most general sense of the word, and that consequently this attitude may imply, in very diverse proportions according to individuals, philosophical materialism, scientific materialism, and simply practical materialism; the first may even often be totally absent, whereas, almost always, the second exercises an influence that is felt, in a more or less conscious way, within practical materialism itself.

It goes without saying, moreover, that all this is at bottom nothing but so many diverse aspects of one and the same tendency, and also that this tendency, like all those which are, in the same way, constitutive of the modern spirit, certainly could not have developed spontaneously; we have explained ourselves often enough on this last point not to insist

upon it again, and we shall only recall what we have said recently about the more precise place occupied by materialism within the ensemble of the "plan" according to which the deviation of the modern world is effected, for this is a consideration that we shall have occasion to encounter again later.

What is truly singular, and would even be comic if it were a matter of less serious things—indeed we might say less sinister ones—is that materialism, one of whose principal pretensions is to suppress all mystery, is itself thus rendered profoundly mysterious; and what is no less so, from another point of view, is that the very notion of "matter," of which it makes its base by definition, turns out to be certainly the most enigmatic and least intelligible that can be.

Needless to say, these are things of which the materialists themselves are perfectly incapable of becoming aware, blinded as they are by their preconceived ideas; they would doubtless be just as astonished to learn that there have existed and that there still exist men for whom what they call "ordinary life" would be the most extraordinary thing imaginable, since it corresponds to nothing of what actually took place in their existence; yet this is indeed so, and what is more, it is these men who must be considered as truly "normal," whereas the materialists, with all their so-much-vaunted "common sense" and all the "progress" of which they proudly regard themselves as the most accomplished products and the most "advanced" representatives, are at bottom only beings in whom certain faculties have become atrophied to the point of being completely abolished.

It is moreover only under this condition that the sensible world can appear to them as a "closed system," within which they feel themselves in perfect security; it remains to be seen how this illusion can, in a certain sense and to a certain extent, be "realized" by materialism itself, but also how, despite this, it represents in some way only an eminently unstable state of equilibrium, and how, at the very point where we are at present, this security of "ordinary life," upon which until now the entire external organization of the modern world has rested, risks strongly

being disturbed by unexpected “interferences.”

(To be continued.)

THE CAVE AND THE WORLD EGG

The initiatic cave, as we have said previously, is an image of the world; but, on the other hand, by reason of its symbolic assimilation with the heart, it represents more particularly the central place. It may seem that there are here two different points of view, but in reality they do not contradict one another in any way, and what we have set forth concerning the World Egg suffices to reconcile them, and even to identify them in a certain sense; indeed, the World Egg is central in relation to the "cosmos," and, at the same time, it contains in germ everything that the latter will contain in the fully manifested state; all things are therefore found in the World Egg, but in a state of "envelopment," which is precisely also figured, as we have explained, by the very situation of the cave, by its character as a hidden and closed place. The two halves into which the World Egg is divided, according to one of the most usual aspects of its symbolism, become respectively heaven and earth; in the cave likewise, the ground corresponds to the earth and the vault to heaven; there is therefore in all this nothing that is not perfectly coherent and normal.

Now there still remains to consider another question that is particularly important from the initiatic point of view: we have spoken of the cave as the place of the "second birth"; but there is an essential distinction to be made between this "second birth" and the "third birth," a distinction which corresponds in sum to that of initiation into the "lesser mysteries" and into the "greater mysteries"; if the "third birth" is also represented as being accomplished in the cave, how will its symbolism be adapted to this? The "second birth," which is properly what may be called "psychic regeneration," takes place in the domain of the subtle possibilities of human individuality; the "third birth," on the contrary, being effected directly in the spiritual order and no longer in the psychic order, is access to the domain of supra-individual possibilities. The one is therefore properly a "birth in the cosmos" (to which corresponds, as we have said, in the macrocosmic order, the birth of the Avatāra), and, consequently, it is logical that it should be figured as taking place

entirely within the cave; but the other is a "birth outside the cosmos," and to this "exit from the cosmos," according to the expression of Hermes[1], there must correspond, for the symbolism to be complete, a final exit from the cave, the latter containing only the possibilities that are included in the "cosmos," possibilities which the initiate must precisely go beyond in this new phase of the development of his being, of which the "second birth" was in reality only the point of departure.

Here, certain relationships will naturally come to be modified: the cave once again becomes a "sepulchre," no longer this time exclusively by reason of its "subterranean" situation, but because the entire "cosmos" is in a certain way the "sepulchre" from which the being must now emerge; the "third birth" is necessarily preceded by the "second death," which is no longer death to the profane world, but truly "death to the cosmos" (and also "in the cosmos"), and this is why the "extra-cosmic" birth is always assimilated to a "resurrection"[2]. For this "resurrection," which is at the same time the exit from the cave, to be able to take place, it is necessary that the stone which closes the opening of the "sepulchre" (that is to say, of the cave itself) be removed; we shall see later how this may be translated, in certain cases, in ritual symbolism.

On the other hand, when what was outside the cave represented only the profane world or the "outer darkness," the cave appeared as the only illuminated place, and moreover necessarily illuminated from its very interior: no light, in fact, could then come to it from outside. Now, since account must be taken of "extra-cosmic" possibilities, the cave, despite this illumination, becomes relatively obscure, in relation, we shall not say to what is outside it without distinction, but more precisely to what is above it, beyond its vault, for it is indeed there that what represents the "extra-cosmic" domain is found. One could then consider, according to this new point of view, the interior illumination as being only the reflection of a light that penetrates through the "roof of the world," by the "solar door," which is the "eye" of the cosmic vault or the upper

1 Cf. A. K. Coomaraswamy, La Vierge allaitant saint Bernard, Études Traditionnelles, December 1937, p. 415.

2 One also finds the analogue of all this in the symbolism of the chrysalis and of its transformation into a butterfly.

opening of the cave. In the microcosmic order, this opening corresponds to the Brahma-randhra, that is to say to the point of contact of individuality with the "seventh ray" of the spiritual Sun[3], a point whose "localization," according to organic correspondences, is found at the crown of the head[4], and which is also figured by the upper opening of the Hermetic athanor[5]. Let us add, in this regard, that the "philosophical egg," which manifestly plays the role of the World Egg, is enclosed within the athanor, but that the latter can itself be assimilated to the "cosmos," and this in the double macrocosmic and microcosmic application; the cave may therefore also be at once symbolically identified with the "philosophical egg" and with the athanor, according as one refers, if one wishes, to different degrees of development in the initiatic process, but in any case without its fundamental signification being in any way altered.

One may also remark that, with this illumination by reflection, one finds again the image of Plato's cave, in which one sees only shadows, by virtue of a light that comes from outside[6]; and this light is indeed "extra-cosmic," since its source is the "intelligible Sun." The liberation of the prisoners and their exit from the cave is a "coming into the light," by which they may directly contemplate the reality of which they had until then perceived only a simple reflection; this reality consists of the eternal "archetypes," the possibilities contained in the "permanent actuality" of immutable essence.

Finally, it is important to note that the two "births" of which we have spoken, being two successive phases of complete initiation, are also, by that very fact, two stages on a single path, and that this path is essentially "axial," just as, in its symbolism, is the "solar ray" to which we referred a moment ago, and which marks the spiritual "direction" that the being must follow, constantly rising, in order finally to reach his

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3 Cf. A. K. Coomaraswamy, loc. cit.

4 See L'Homme et son devenir selon le Vêdânta, ch. XX.

5 The "third birth" could, by employing alchemical terminology, be regarded as a "sublimation."

6 This obscure vision is the vision quasi per speculum in aenigmate of which Saint Paul speaks (First Epistle to the Corinthians, XIII, 12); what appears as manifested in the "cosmos" is properly only a shadow or a "vertigo" of transcendent reality, but this is moreover what gives it its value as a symbol of that reality.

true center[7]. Within the limits of the microcosm, this "axial" direction is that of the suṣumṇā, which extends as far as the crown of the head, from where it is prolonged, one might say "extra-individually," by the "solar ray" itself, traversed in ascending back toward its source; it is along the suṣumṇā that the chakras are found, which are the subtle centers of individuality, and to certain of which correspond the different positions of the luz, or "nucleus of immortality," that we considered previously, in such a way that these very positions, or the successive "awakening" of the corresponding chakras, are always likewise assimilable to stages situated on the same "axial" path. On the other hand, the Axis of the World being naturally identified with the vertical direction, which indeed corresponds to this idea of an ascending path, the upper opening, which corresponds microcosmically to the crown of the head as we have said, should normally, in this respect, be situated at the zenith of the cave, that is to say at the very summit of the vault. However, the question in fact presents certain complications due to the fact that two different modalities of symbolism, one "polar" and the other "solar," may intervene here; this is why it is appropriate, with regard to the exit from the cave, to provide still further clarifications which will at the same time furnish an example of the relationships that these two modalities may have with one another, whose respective predominance originally corresponds to different cyclical periods, but which, subsequently, have often become associated and combined in multiple ways.

7 Cf. aṣ-Ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm in the Islamic tradition.